Pakistan eye series sweep with Babar back to his best

Dawn Report

RAWALPINDI: Pakistan coach Mike Hesson was convinced well before Babar Azam's exploits on Friday that the batting mainstay was in his best form.

After Pakistan clinched the One-day International series over South Africa last weekend, Hesson had predicted that Babar would soon get a big score.

Six days later, Babar obliged by ending an 83-inning century drought across all formats by scoring an unbeaten 102 to guide Pakistan to yet another ODI series triumph as the hosts coasted to an eight-wicket victory in the second game of their series against Sri Lanka at the Pindi Cricket Stadium.

Match starts at 2:30pm (PST)

More fittingly, Mohammad Rizwan was alongside Babar as the 31-year-old sank to the ground in prostration and celebration after completing his 20th ODI ton.

The duo, who have for so long carried Pakistan's batting, recorded their 17th 100-run partnership across all formats and their bond showed when Rizwan, who got a half-century, raised his arm in celebration as Babar completed the run that took him to the three-figure mark.

"We had planned how we were going to take the chase," Rizwan would later say in a video released by the Pakistan Cricket Board, standing alongside Babar. "But importantly, we were planning how we could ensure that he gets to his century. He's so very important to the team so it's crucial he recaptured his best form."

The crowd was in raptures as the 'Riz-Bar' duo helped the home side ease to the 289-run target with their first century partnership in almost a year.

Rizwan informed the duo had "subtracted one over from the equation" and were aiming to finish the game in the 49th over.

"Whenever we get a big partnership going, it becomes memorable," reflected Babar.

During his century drought, Babar had batted 33 times in ODIs, 26 times in T20Is, and 24 times in Tests. "I was getting starts but wasn't converting them to big scores," he added.

At the press conference after the match, Babar spoke about keeping his self-belief.

"It was a tough time," he said. "But I tried to back myself as much as possible. I worked on the things I felt needed improvement — my fitness, my batting, everything.

"In the end it's about belief. As a cricketer these phases come in your life, but you have to follow your plan every single day. Eventually the reward comes."

Even the opposition hailed his century.

"We wanted to get him out early but we couldn't," rued Sri Lankan batter Sadeera Samawickrama at the post-match press conference. "He got a good hundred and won the match for his team. He's a world class player and it was a brilliant knock."

With Babar back to his best, Pakistan will look to secure a series sweep in the third and final ODI on Sunday.

For Sri Lanka, Friday's defeat ended their hopes of a fourth straight ODI series triumph.

"We didn't take our chances today and we'd like to play good cricket in the last game," Samarawickrama said.

'PSL experience to help Zimbabwe in tri-series'

ISLAMABAD: While terming the experience held by some Zimbabwe players of featuring in the Pakistan Super League (PSL) invaluable, assistant coach Dion Ebrahim on Saturday said that his team will be targeting victory in the forthcoming T20 tri-nation series in Pakistan.

"We [as a team] have been working for over a year, and we have played competitive cricket [during this period]. We are looking to win the [the T20 tri-series] with the ambition to compete and win," Ebrahim said while talking to reporters at the Islamabad Club ground.

"We want to play the brand of cricket that is exciting and appealing for fans [in Pakistan] to support us. It's like taking two steps ahead in the lead-up to the T20 World Cup [in February-March]."

Zimbabwe will be competing against Pakistan and Sri Lanka in a tri-nation T20 series starting in Rawalpindi with a match between Pakistan and Zimbabwe on Tuesday. All the games of the event will be staged in Rawalpindi.

Members of the Zimbabwe squad practised at the Islamabad Club ground on Saturday. The Pakistan team, meanwhile, held an extensive training session at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium.

On whether the PSL experience of players like Brendan Taylor and Sikandar Raza will be important for Zimbabwe in the forthcoming tri-series, Ebrahim said that the knowledge held by these players would be vital.

"There is a slightly different climate [in Rawalpindi]. So, the experience of these players of playing in PSL is going to be invaluable for us," the coach said.

Answering a question, he said that the Zimbabwe squad was excited to participate in the tri-nation series.

"Our squad, which has a number of youngsters coming over to Pakistan for the first time, is very excited to play this tri-series. We are excited for the challenges ahead."

Responding to a query on whether Zimbabwe would be targeting any specific Pakistan batter like Babar Azam or Fakhar Zaman, Ebrahim categorically said that they were eyeing all the opposition players.

"In T20s, if you put your [complete] attention on one player, you lose sight of the unfolding game in front of you. Both Babar and Fakhar are world-class players, we respect them, but we have plans and strategies for all the [opponent] players," he said.

The assistant coach praised his bowling attack. "We have got [pacer] Richard Ngarava, who is world-class and has shown time and again in T20 cricket that he's the best. Then we have young, explosive, dynamic athletes as well, so we are very excited," Ebrahim said. —Sports Reporter

TURIN: Australia's Alex de Minaur hits a return during the ATP Finals last-four match against Jannik Sinner of Italy at the Palasport Olimpico on Saturday.—Reuters

Sinner dominates De Minaur to reach ATP Finals title match

TURIN: Defending champion Jannik Sinner stormed to a 7-5, 6-2 victory over Alex de Minaur in the last four of the ATP Finals on Saturday, as the Australian suffered his 13th straight loss to the four-time Grand Slam winner despite a fighting start.

World number two Sinner had to dig deep to get his first break of the match, which tipped the first set in his favour. The Italian took the first four games of the second set to ensure victory, backed by a supportive crowd at Turin's Palasport Olimpico.

"It was a very tough match, especially at the beginning of the first set. Felt like [De Minaur] was serving great," said Sinner, who has now reached the final of the season-ending championship for the third time in a row. "In the second set... my level raised and I tried to be a bit more aggressive, which worked very well."

Sinner will try to defend his title on Sunday against top-ranked Carlos Alcaraz or Felix Auger-Aliassime.

Seventh seed De Minaur fended off two break points to hold the opening game of the match and was on the verge of a break after going 40-0 up in the second, but Sinner held his nerve to hold.

Neither player could get a break as the match stayed even until the 11th game, when Sinner's perfectly angled backhand evaded a stumbling De Minaur to put the Italian 6-5 ahead. Sinner held the next game with ease to clinch the first set.

Sinner dominated the second set, bringing up match point with a strong backhand volley before sealing victory with a powerful forehand that was well outside De Minaur's reach.

"Tomorrow I will enjoy, I will try my best to have the best possible result but in any case, it has been an amazing week," added Sinner, who hasn't dropped a set at the ATP Finals since losing the 2023 final to Novak Djokovic.

In Friday's late action, Auger-Aliassime claimed the last semi-final spot with a 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) round-robin win over two-times winner Alexander Zverev.

Germany's Zverev and Auger-Aliassime both defeated American Ben Shelton and lost to Sinner to set up a winner-takes-all clash for the runners-up spot in the Bjorn Borg Group and the Canadian set up a last-four clash against world number one Alcaraz.

Zverev was left to rue his failure to take any of his seven break points against Sinner, and it was a similarly frustrating story against the Canadian.

The German held break points in both sets but again could not make them count, and the Canadian broke Zverev at 5-4 up to take the first set, before going on to win the second set tie-break.

World number three Zverev ends his year with just the Munich title to his name.—Agencies

India close in on win over SA after Jadeja heroics

KOLKATA: Veteran spinner Ravindra Jadeja took four wickets to put India in sight of victory on a manic day two of a low-scoring opening Test on Saturday.

South Africa were 93-7 at stumps to lead by 63 runs in their second innings on an Eden Gardens pitch that has made batting decidedly tricky.

Fifteen wickets fell during the second day and KL Rahul's 39 — from 119 balls — in India's first innings remains the highest individual score of the match.

Proteas skipper Temba Bavuma tried to replicate Rahul's obduracy, making an unbeaten 29. Corbin Bosch, on one, was with him when play was called off due to bad light.

Spinner Simon Harmer had dragged the visitors back into the contest with figures of 4-30 that helped bowl out India for 189 with the hosts taking a slender lead of 30.

"Playing in India you know you will be under pressure and I thought we fought back well today in restricting them," Harmer told reporters. "Cricket's a funny game, we could be sitting here tomorrow night with a completely different story.

Scoreboard

SOUTH AFRICA (1st Innings) 159 (A. Markram 31; J. Bumrah 5-27)
INDIA (1st Innings, overnight 37-1):
Y. Jaiswal b Jansen 12
KL Rahul c Markram b Maharaj 39
W. Sundar c Markram b Harmer 29
S. Gill retired hurt 4
R. Pant c Verreynne b Bosch 27
R. Jadeja lbw Harmer 27
D. Jurel c & b Harmer 14
A. Patel c Jansen b Harmer 16
K. Yadav c Verreynne b Jansen 1
M. Siraj b Jansen 1
J. Bumrah not out 1
EXTRAS (B-9, LB-2, NB-5, W-2) 18
TOTAL (all out, 62.2 overs) 189
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-18 (Jaiswal), 2-75 (Sundar), 3-109 (Rahul), 4-132 (Pant), 5-153 (Jurel), 6-171 (Jadeja), 7-172 (Yadav), 8-187 (Siraj), 9-189 (Patel)
BOWLING: Jansen 15-4-35-3 (1w, 3nb); Mulder 5-1-15-0 (2nb); Maharaj 16-1-66-1; Bosch 11-4-32-1 (1w); Harmer 15.2-4-30-4
SOUTH AFRICA (2nd Innings):
R. Rickelton lbw Yadav 11
A. Markram c Jurel b Jadeja 4
W. Mulder c Pant b Jadeja 11
T. Bavuma not out 29
T. de Zorzi c Jurel b Jadeja 2
T. Stubbs b Jadeja 5
K. Verreynne b Patel 9
M. Jansen c Rahul b Yadav 13
C. Bosch not out 1
EXTRAS (LB-8) 8
TOTAL (for seven wickets, 35 overs) 93
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-18 (Rickelton), 2-25 (Markram), 3-38 (Mulder), 4-40 (de Zorzi), 5-60 (Stubbs), 6-75 (Verreynne), 7-91 (Jansen)
STILL TO BAT: S. Harmer, K. Maharaj
BOWLING: Bumrah 6-1-14-0; Patel 11-0-30-1; Yadav 5-1-12-2; Jadeja 13-3-29-4

INDIAN spinner Ravindra Jadeja celebrates after dismissing South African batter Tristan Stubbs during the first Test at the Eden Gardens on Saturday.—AFP

"We need to obviously try and get as many as we can and get past 100. If we can get to 150, that would be incredible but it's obviously quite difficult. If there is one thing that this team has showed it's that they can fight when the backs are against the wall."

Jadeja's 27 was key to India's first innings total and the 36-year-old all-rounder showed the other side of his game with some testing left-arm spin.

South Africa found themselves in a hole when Kuldeep Yadav and Jadeja removed the openers Ryan Rickelton and Aiden Markram either side of the tea break.

Jadeja kept up the pressure as he struck twice in one over to send back Wiaan Mulder, caught behind by Rishabh Pant for 11, and two balls later Tony de Zorzi who was caught off his glove and thigh pad by Dhruv Jurel at short-leg.

He had South Africa in more trouble when he spun the ball sharply to bowl Tristan Stubbs for five to bring the house down at the iconic venue that had over 47,000 fans according to official data.

The biggest cloud on India's horizon was the absence of skipper Shubman Gill who retired hurt on four with a neck problem. He did not return to resume his innings and nor did he field, with vice-captain Pant leading the team.

Bowling coach Morne Morkel was non-committal about Gill's chances of batting in the second innings.

"I think we first need to determine how he got the neck stiffness, maybe it's just a bad night's sleep," he said denying that it was the result of Gill's all-format workload. "Shubman is a very fit guy. He looks after himself very well. So it was just unfortunate that he woke up with a stiff neck."

Earlier, India lost regular wickets to survive just 62.2 overs in response to South Africa's first innings total of 159.

"Even we didn't expect the wicket to deteriorate so quickly," Morkel said. "I thought it to be a good wicket in the first couple of overs, but that's the beauty of playing in the sub-continent that you need to adapt and react quickly. We have quality with both seam and spin and that covers both bases."

The hosts resumed on 37-1 with overnight batters Rahul and Washington Sundar, who made 29, extending their partnership to 57 in a grinding first hour.

Pant hit a 24-ball 27 on a pitch with inconsistent bounce and more turn expected.

Sundar hit two fours and one six in his otherwise laboured knock before falling caught behind to Harmer.

Gill walked out to loud cheers but his stay was limited to three balls as he swept Harmer for a four at backward square-leg and then held his neck in pain.

The physio soon arrived and Gill walked back to the pavilion.

Rahul kept up his hard work from day one when he made 13 off 59 balls and on day two looked more assured until his departure off Keshav Maharaj.

India went into lunch at 138-4 and Jurel started with two fours after the break before Harmer had him caught and bowled for 14 to trigger a collapse.

Jadeja took India into the lead with a boundary but fell lbw to Harmer and India slipped further when pace bowler Jansen had Kuldeep caught behind for one.

Harmer cleaned up Axar Patel to end the Indian innings. Jansen returned figures of 3-35.—Agencies

Pope among the runs as merry England wrap up pre-Ashes friendly

Setback for Australia as Hazlewood ruled out of first Test

PERTH: Time in the middle and keeping their fast bowling unit injury-free topped England's agenda as they wrapped up their only pre-Ashes practice match on Saturday against a second-string England Lions at Lilac Hill in Perth's north-east.

The result being of no importance, a sporting Lions declaration on the final day of the three-day warm-up gave England's first-choice batsmen just over two hours to chase 202, which they achieved with five wickets remaining.

"The guys have all had a good three days out here," said paceman Brydon Carse, who landed three wickets after recovering from a 24-hour bug. "The group of seamers have all got a decent amount of overs in and some of the batters have spent some time at the crease. Everyone is raring to go."

Number three batsman Ollie Pope backed up a first-innings century with a breezy 90 from the attacking 'Bazball' play-book, while Joe Root scored an unremarkable 31.

Earlier, Ashes hopeful Jacob Bethell top-scored for the Lions with 70.

England are in good spirits after fast bowler Mark Wood, who complained of hamstring stiffness on day one, was given the all-clear following scans.

The visitors' hopes in the opening Perth Test, starting on Friday, were further boosted with confirmation that Australia seamer Josh Hazlewood had been ruled out with a hamstring strain.

"He's obviously a massive bowler for Australia, I'm sure we'll see some part of him throughout the series," said Carse.

The 34-year-old's omission leaves Australia, who have also lost skipper Pat Cummins to injury, in disarray given that the two men have combined for 31 wickets in five Tests at Perth Stadium, which is always conducive to pace and bounce.

Mitchell Starc and Scott Boland will now have to shoulder a heavy workload, while South Australia's Brendan Doggett is in line for his international debut.

Seam-bowling all-rounder Michael Neser, who last played a Test in 2022, was promoted into Australia's squad.

England's exploits at the riverside Lilac Hill in Perth's outer suburbs were viewed by only a few hundred onlookers despite free entry.

While it was an oddity in the modern era for a full-strength draw card such as England to play with such muted fanfare, it also suited the humble park venue framed by district matches on neighbouring pitches.

It was a far cry from the ground's heyday, however, when 11,000 fans would pack temporary grandstands to watch annual festival games involving touring teams and a local side infused with retired greats.—Reuters

Palestinian football team on 'mission' for peace in Spain visit

BILBAO: On a "mission" in Spain, Palestinian national team coach Ehab Abu Jazar and his players will play symbolic friendlies against the Basque Country and Catalan national teams in the hopes of working towards safety and freedom for their people.

Dressed in a black tracksuit, whistle in mouth, Palestinian coach Abu Jazar leads the team's training session with authority at Lezama, Athletic Bilbao's training ground on Friday.

On one of the pitches offered by the top-flight club he tries to prepare his players as best he can for what will be much more than just a match at the grand San Mames stadium, in front of 50,000 spectators supporting the Palestinian cause on Saturday.

As seen during the pro-Palestinian protests that heavily affected cycling's Vuelta a Espana Grand Tour this summer, there is heavy support for them in the region as they play their first match in Europe.

They are 98th in the FIFA rankings, and their dream of playing in their first World Cup vanished this summer in the third round of the Asian qualifiers.

Abu Jazar has lost many family members to the Israel-Hamas war and some of his relatives are still at risk, a situation always present in his thoughts.

"I am from the Gaza Strip, from a large family in the Gaza Strip. We have almost 200 martyrs from the family. My own house was destroyed in this war," he tells AFP.

"My relatives, my mother until today is still living in a tent along with my brothers, my sisters, my cousins, my neighbours, my friends, and all of Gaza. So, emotionally and psychologically, it is extremely difficult."

Most of his players have never set foot in Gaza. Some play in Qatar, one in Chile, in Iceland, or in the United States.

They are the last representatives of Palestinian football, devastated at all levels by two years of Israeli bombardment, described as genocide by the Spanish government.

Since then, there has been no league, no functioning clubs, and hundreds of athletes have been injured or killed, including the country's most famous footballer, Suleiman Al-Obeid, 41, nicknamed the "Palestinian Pele".

The Palestine Football Association said he was killed when Israel attacked civilians waiting for humanitarian aid.

"From day one, they targeted sports. They destroyed all the infrastructure in Gaza, 289 [locations] in total," Palestinian Football Federation president Jibril Rajoub tells AFP.

"1,100 athletes, employees, coaches, and referees have been killed, including our captain [Al-Obeid]. Thousands have been injured, hundreds of others are missing."

"Israel should be sanctioned," continues the 72-year-old chief, also the secretary-general of Fatah, the party of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

"We are here on a mission," explains coach Abu Jazar, adjusting his keffiyeh around his neck. "Our message to the whole world is this — put pressure on this occupation to stop this genocide."

'DEATH AND FAMINE CONTINUE'

Despite the fragile ceasefire which came into place on October 10, the coach highlighted the continuing peril for civilians in Gaza.

"Death continues in Gaza to this day, famine continues in the Gaza Strip, and there is no shelter," continues Abu Jazar, after Israel's relentless bombing razed much of the land.

"So we are telling the entire world — apply as much pressure as you can on this occupation, because in Palestine there is a people who deserve a state and a dignified life.

"We want to live with dignity and independence, and this will not happen except with the end of the occupation."

The coach, like his players, hopes this charity match, with proceeds donated to Doctors Without Borders, will help increase the "pressure" on the international community to fight for lasting peace and recognition of a Palestinian state.

"This is the most important thing — giving a voice to Palestinians who don't have one, and raising funds to help humanitarian organisations," said defender Yaser Hamed, born in Bilbao and trained at Athletic Bilbao.

"This money will help a lot, especially in rebuilding hospitals, delivering medicines, etc."

Hamed, who speaks fluent Basque and Spanish, considers himself "lucky" to be able to continue living his passion, "while some Palestinians are starving." "It makes you savour every plate, and all the little things people don't notice in daily life," he continued.

"We have this responsibility to bring a bit of joy to our compatriots who are suffering. All of this must stop, and Palestine must finally be free."

His team-mate Ahmed Al-Qaq, born in the United States to Palestinian parents, hopes these matches can "open the world's eyes" to the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

"We are not politicians, but as players, we give people something to look forward to. Especially with everything they're going through, it gives them a glimmer of hope," explains the 23-year-old winger.

And if Palestine lose, as they did against Malaysia and Algeria in recent matches? "We'll recover. It's in our genes to always get back up when we fall."—AFP